

The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 21st July, 2024

"What did they see in him?"



Listening for Sacred Wisdom

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 This story follows on from Jesus' sending his disciples out in pairs to spread his mission in the villages...

30 The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things.

53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

What did they see in him? What was it about Jesus that grabbed their attention? Was it just the miracle healings, do you think, or something more...?

The reading from Mark's gospel that we've just heard is less action packed than some of Mark's other stories. In fact, the two parts of it (vs30-34, & 53-56) form 'bookends' to two of Mark's more well-known stories: the loaves and fish and Jesus walking on water. As I looked at that, I wondered what the creators of the lectionary were trying to get us to explore. And I think it's this: **it's stepping back a little from the miracle stories to reflect on what people saw in Jesus himself, rather than just his miracles.**

Clearly, the various healings and other miraculous events attributed to Jesus were a large part of what attracted the crowds, and it seems that this frustrated him on quite a few occasions. John's gospel tells the story of people following after Jesus after he fed the crowd. There he challenges them to listen to his words and message, and to follow GOD's way, rather than simply following him for the free food!

It's important to remember that Jesus never seemed interested in gathering followers for the sake of it - he'd be no good on Facebook or Instagram! The point was always about raising up followers for Jesus' vision of the way of GOD. He was very clear that discipleship was about the faith of Jesus, not faith in Jesus

So what did they see in Jesus? There's a couple of things we see in these few verses in Mark.

Perhaps most of all, we might see his **compassion**.

We see his compassion for his disciples and friends. This story picks up after Jesus had sent his disciples out to all the towns around, to preach, teach and live the message of GOD's way. They come back to him, excited by all they had done, seen and experienced. His response is to take them somewhere quiet to rest, to eat, and to process what they have experienced.

I have a picture of him sitting with his friends - sharing in their experiences, laughing with their successes, listening to their failures, helping them to understand what they had done, and to learn.

But as we know, Jesus' fame is spreading, his mission is starting to take off, and they're not left alone for long! As they step ashore, they're surrounded by the crowds, all clamouring for attention.

I'm not sure about you, but I suspect that I might have been tempted to say "*Hey everyone, let's turn the boat around and go somewhere else for a bit*". But Jesus doesn't. He's moved by compassion for the crowd because, as Mark puts it, "*they were like sheep without a shepherd*".

We don't know exactly what that means, but it's very clear that Jesus sees not only their need, but also an openness to what he's about. Contrast this with the lack of interest and the hostility in Jesus' visit to Nazareth, told earlier in the same chapter. (Mk 6:1-6).

His response to the crowd is to spend time with them, to attend to their need to learn from him, and their desire to hear what he has to say. **So they see his compassion.**

But wait, there's more! They see also, Jesus' **faithfulness**.

I mentioned before the faith of Jesus. We must remember that Jesus lived and died as a faithful Jew. Mark's gospel places Jesus firmly within the teaching traditions of his faith, but in a way that enables the law to find different expression through acts of compassion.

I have believed for a long time that Jesus was committed to the Law, and challenged people to understand and practise it in ways that went beyond simple legalism. "*If you can see within the Law, a way of excluding people from the love of GOD*" he seemed to say often, "*then you do not understand what the Law is all about*".

For Jesus, and the teachings of his people, I believe that 'keeping' the commandments, was about more than simple compliance and obedience to the 'letter of the law'. It was about living their meaning, and attending to the hope and vision within them.

"You shall love the Lord your GOD with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Matt 22:37- 40)

This, I suggest, was what people saw in Jesus, that they didn't always see in the others who claimed to be representing the way of GOD. Then, as now, religious leaders didn't always practise what we preached.

Those gathered around Jesus saw compassion and faithfulness interwoven in the one person.

And pretty quickly after he died, they began to name these things as not only the marks of a good and profound man, but as the marks of one in whom they had seen, uniquely, the way and life of GOD.

The irony is that such awareness and naming began to shift the faith of Jesus into faith in Jesus. Ironic because that was never his way.

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What about you? What about us? What do we see in him?

I'd like each of us to sit for a few moments with this question:

*"What do I see in Jesus that makes me want to follow his way?"*

I've had a while to think about it, as I prepared for this Witness. For me,

- It's the storyteller who called people to imagine... to raise their eyes and see GOD among them!
- It's the preacher of the way of GOD revealed in the way of love...
- It's the poet who said crazy things like "*blessed are those who mourn*", and "*the kingdom of heaven is like a woman who loses a coin...*"
- It's the visionary so caught up in his faith in GOD that he was willing to die for it...
- It's the one who inspired those around him to imagine a world transformed...

What do I see in Jesus?

I see a heart for LIFE!: sacred life in the world, that I call GODly!  
A life of abundant grace, and liberating hope.

That last phrase isn't mine: "*abundant grace, and liberating hope*". It was the theme of the 2018 Uniting Church Assembly meeting, which I attended – at Box Hill Town Hall actually. And it's a phrase which has stayed with me ever since, as a great image of the way and faith of Jesus.

(By the way, as I looked at it during that meeting six years ago, I realised something. The word '*liberating*', in that context, could be an adjective or a verb. It could be *hope* which was liberating. It could also be part of our calling to '*liberate*' hope - to set it free in the world? What does THAT look like? That, too, has stayed with me in the years since then)

But enough about me: What catches your imagination about Jesus? What do you see in him, that continues to inspire you?

Many of us have been Christians for a long time, and perhaps we remember what it was about him that grabbed our attention years ago.

I wonder if it's still the same thing... Or has it changed for you? What is it that makes Jesus a compelling figure for you today? A particular story, or characteristic? Is it something he said or did? I wonder...

And as I wonder, I'd encourage you to not only think about it, but talk about it with one other person some time soon, if you get the chance.

Don't worry if it sounds 'theological' or not, or if you're not sure about the words, or feel you might say the 'wrong' thing. If your answer is more like a question, ask it of one of your fellow travelers. If I've given you something to think about, think about it together. Each time I stand up to share my Witness to the Word I'm aware of how much wisdom is in the room, drawn from lots of faithful experience: it'd be a shame to waste it!

What I love about my faith is that there's always more to discover and grow into. That's enough to inspire me, encourage me, and challenge me to go on following him as best I can. And I dare to hope that what we hear, remember, and share today, will encourage each of us in the act of living his way, together and apart.

Blessings, *Rod Peppiatt*